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ABSTRACT

The intense striving for power which characterizes much of male behavior occurs inevitably as part of the process of gender acquisition and consequently contributes to a sense of psychological vulnerability in the male personality. Masculine and feminine attributes develop spontaneously from young children's tendencies to compare themselves to adult men and women on anatomic criteria in order to establish their gender. When asked to explain the difference between men and women, children describe women as small, physically powerless, gentle, pretty, with high-pitched voices and soft skin. They view women as present or future mothers, and believe women have an innate ability to nurture children. Adult men are described as larger, more powerful individuals with facial and body hair and deep voices. Girls, through their automatic association with motherhood and other physical attributes of women, early acquire a sexual legitimacy. Boys do not have a comparable basis on which to securely ground their masculine identity. The structural developmental position enunciated here proposes that many of the typically "male" behavior patterns outlined and discussed in the literature are inevitable: they result from the young boy's attempt to acquire and exhibit those aspects of masculinity most salient to him in defining his sexual gender. (Author/RH)

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Why Boys Will Be Boys: A Structural Perspective

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The literature on sex-roles focuses primarily on the social institutions which perpetuate female subordination while promoting the superior status and prestige of males. It argues that the different expectations which society holds for men and women create a male personality which is powerful, competent, aggressive and independent, while the female is conditioned to remain passive, dependent, nurturant and submissive (Block, J., 1973; Kagan, J., 1964: Miller, J.B., 1976; Rosenkrantz, P., Vogel, S., Bee, H., Broverman, I. & Broverman D., 1968). This view, which is predicated upon a social conception of power and status, provides the conceptual framework for current psychological theories of male and female development. It implies that there is a direct and decisive relationship between external social conditions and the psychological experience associated with a masculine or feminine identity.

In this paper, I will distinguish between actual social power which accrues to an individual through political, social or material advantage, and the psychological experience of power which results from the individual's assessment of personal worth. This distinction implies that there is no necessary relationship between a given set of social conditions and subsequent psychological functioning. Rather, I will argue that the position of relative economic or social superiority obviously enjoyed by many males in a broad social context does not correspond to the psychological experience of power or dominance.

Within this context, I will propose the hypothesis that

the sex-role identity of young boys arises from a different set of developmental concepts than that of females, and that the nature of those concepts force the male child to contend with a greater degree of uncertainty about his sexual identity than the female child. Based on empirical studies with children, as well as on principles of cognitive-developmental theory, it is proposed that the intense striving for power which characterizes much of male behavior occurs inevitably as part of the process of gender acquisition and consequently contributes to a sense of psychological vulnerability or insecurity in the male personality.

Discussing the theme of male vulnerability, a growing number of writers in the field of sex-role development have identified the strains or conflicts inherent in the male role. Focusing primarily on the different socialization patterns for males and females, these studies have pointed to the pressure created when boys lack sufficient contact with the paternal figure (Hartley, 1959), to the narrow range of socially acceptable behavior permitted to males (Brown, 1958), as well as to the absence of a close emotional bond uniting father and son Lynn, 1963).

Noting the structural and dynamic features of nuclear family arrangements, other theorists have pointed to the dominant role of mothers in severely limiting or distorting their sons' capacity for personal and emotional growth. Because of the

repression presumably required by the oedipal conflict, the male has been described as more vulnerable and unsupported in his later emotional relationships (Chodorow, 1971; Dinnerstein, 1976). A more recent theoretical formulation proposed by Tooley (1977) furthur suggests that boys suffer unfavorable effects in the development of a male ego. Aware of the preferential treatment accorded to girls of his age, Tooley contends that the boy turns his interest away from the world of people to the world of objects and things. He adopts a fidgety, action-oriented mode characterized by aggression and a lack of interpersonal skills.

Furthur support for the notion of male vulnerability comes from Horney's work on womb envy (1967). Noting the female's undeniable childbearing capacity, she points to the excessive demands placed on the male personality as a result of his continuous need to prove his manhood to the woman. Due to a basic sense of genital inadequacy acquired in early childhood, Horney contends that the male is forced to continue proving his manhood to the woman, who in turn may perform her role through the relatively simple sexual and childbearing functions.

In this paper, I will propose a structural developmental hypothesis which shifts the locus of male vulnerability from early patterns of childrearing or from the notion of biological inferiority to the nature of sex-role concepts constructed by children themselves. It will be argued that masculine and feminine attributes develop spontaneously from young children's tendency to compare themselves to adult men and women

on anatomic criteria in order to estalbish their sexual gender. In the case of boys, the discrepency between the child's perception of adult masculinity and his own existing attributes forces him to strive to acquire his male identity. This is reflected in the stereotyped activities, roles and play behaviors characteristic of young boys. I shall also consider some of the behavioral and emotional consequences which may result from this developmental discontinuity, and suggest ways in which the structural developmental approach provides guidelines and principles from which educational and clinical efforts might proceed more effectively.

A Structural Developmental Hypothesis

Developmental studies of sex-role concepts have shown that the characteristics used by young children to differentiate the sexes tend to be tangible concrete attributes which can be readily understood at the preoperational child's level of cognitive functioning. Studies with children between 4 and 7 years of age indicate that masculinity and femininity are distinguished along such dimensions as size, strength, depth of voice, body and facial hair, as well as the capacity for bearing children (Kagan, 1964; Kohlberg, 1966: Kohlberg & Ullian, 1975; Ullian, 1976) When asked to explain the differences between men and women, young children of both sexes describe women as small, physically powerless, gentle, pretty, with high-pitched voices and soft skin. They view all women as present

or future mothers, and believe they have an innate ability to care for and nurture children. Adult men, in contrast, are described as larger, more powerful individuals with facial and body hair and deep voices. As a result, they are seen as more competent, frightening and more dominant in family and occupational areas than their adult female counterparts (Kohlberg, 1966; Ullian, 1976).

There is also evidence which suggests that gender constancy for the young child depends on the visibility of such sex-related attributes as clothing, hairstyle and the like. The cognitive structuring of preoperational children lead them to rely on concrete perceptible cues to define their gender and to ensure its permanence. For example, even as late as seven years of age, deviation in dress, appearance, toys and activities is interpreted by young children as a potential violation or distortion of their sexual gender (Emmerich, E., Goldman, K., & Sharabany, R., 1977; Ullian, 1976).

Based on this data regarding the young child's cognitive structuring of sex-related information, the developmental consequences for boys and girls of the anatomical differences they perceive between men and women must be considered. Little girls are small relative to the general population, they are physically weak; they have a high-pitched voice, a clear hairless facial complexion, and most important, they are the future bearers of children. In fact, interviews with young girls

revealed that most of them believed that they already had some form of baby in them. While they had a variety of explanations for how the baby would emerge, ranging from the stork to more accurate representations of sperm and ovum, most of the girls viewed the birth of a baby as an inevitable and highly desirable fact of life (Bernstein, 1976). Thus, the existing attributes of young girls, from size and body characteristics to the inevitability of motherhood, tend to be consistent with those of the women they aspire to become. The five or six year old girl is small, or as we later come to view her "petite"; she is free of body and facial hair, or "soft-skinned"; she has a high-pitched "angelic" voice; and most important, she either already has within her or inevitably will create a baby, just like her mother. She is "feminine", even at five or six years of age.

Now let us consider the young male child's physical traits and those which he is expected to acquire. The young boy of six is small relative to the general population, he is relatively weak, he is hairless on face and body and he has a high-pitched voice. In contrast to the adult male, the young boy's physical stature is obviously discrepent from those characteristics he uses to define his gender. On none of the attributes of importance to him - except the possession of a penis (which explains perhaps the young child's preoccupation with it, and its subsequent importance in theories of psychosexual development) is

he like the man he wants and is expected to become, Thus, at this stage of development at least, the degree of consistency between the young girl's present physical attributes and her desired future traits provides her with a clear, unambiguous connection to her female identity. The young girl possesses the anatomical signs of her future feminine role, i.e. smallness, a baby, etc., and correspondingly acts in often maternal nurturant ways. She also has the advantages of verbal and intellectual precocity at this age level. The young boy not only fails to conform to the required masculine attributes of the adult male, but is often motorically and intellectually inferior even to the female child on many of these dimensions. Thus, girls, through their automatic association with motherhood and other physical attributes of women, acquire early on a sexual legitimacy and validity . Their male counterparts do not have a comparable basis on which to securely ground their masculine identity.

This notion of developmental discontinuity implies that much of the behavior typically observed in young males represents a spontaneous effort on the part of young boys to express their sexual gender. Striving to be large, strong, powerful and dominant - traits which define the male role, the young male child is apt to select those toys, games, roles and activities which promote and reflect such attributes, Thus, the young boys' preoccupation with guns (Feinberg, 1976),

rough and tumble play (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974), dramatic roles stressing danger and conflict (Brodzinsky, Messer & Tew, 1979), heroes of gigantic proportions (Cramer & Hogan, 1975), and themes depicting expulsion, protrusion, conflict and expansion (Erikson, 1950) permit the young boy to achieve greater consistency between his existing traits and those adult characteristics he lacks, but seeks to acquire.

An examination of the literature on sex-role stereotyping provides empirical support for the notion of structural discontinuity in male development. The breadth of toys, friends, roles and games considered approriate by young boys reflects their tendency to adopt a very "strict" and often inflexible definition of masculine behavior. For example, there is widespread evidence that by two and 3 years of age, boys are more stereotyped than comparable age girls. Their preferences for sex-typed activities, toys and objects are typically well established by 2 to 3 years of age, and increase with age thereafter until they reach a ceiling at 7 or 8 years. While girls show a clear pattern of sex-typing at 3 or 4 years, there is a sharp decline in the number of sex-typed items selected between 5 and 8 years of age (Brown, 1958; Fauls & Smith, 1956; Kohlberg, 1966). Not only are girls at play more likely to imitate boys than boys are to imitate girls (Fein, G., Johnson, D., Kosson, N., Stark, L. & Wasserman, L., 1976), but boys also exhibit a consistent preference for same-sex peers as early as 4 years of age, while girls' same sex preferences for peers declines with age. Even data from older subjects reveal a tendency

for males to be more resistent to efforts at sex-role intervention at all age levels studied (Guttentag, 1976).

However, it is important to note that males not only show a narrower, more circumscribed range of behaviors, roles, attitudes and peers than do females. There is also evidence of more aggressive, dominating content in the behavior of boys relative to girls. Even before entering grade school, girls characteristically play in smaller groups than boys, they show less rough and tumble play than their male counterparts, and they fight less than boys in larger groups (Brodzinsky et. al., 1979; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Examination of the fantasy play of young boys and girls reveal passive themes of family and domestic life among girls, while boys express themes of activity, danger and violence, using more mobile, adventuresome props (Cramer & Hogan, 1975). The work of Bates and Bentler (1973) with normal and effeminate boys indicates that normal boys play more of the relatively unstructured games such as cowboys and indians, cars and king of the mountain until the age of 7 or 8, at which point they show an increase in the number of atheletic games they play.

With regard to temperamental differences between boys and girls, Maccoby and Jacklin report that during the 2½ to 5 year old shift, boys become angry twice as frequently as girls, they engage in more mock fighting, they exchange more verbal insults, and they are more likely than girls to counterattack if aggressed against. In fact, the notion of a distinct style of masculine aggression has been proposed and described by Good-

enough (1957). Based on interviews with parents asked to describe their children's personalities, she observed:

> Parents' comments about aggression or activity in their children seem to imply in boys a force barely held under control, "dynamic", "a bomb shell", "bold", "belligerent". These mothers felt that the cup was running over: "a great deal of unnecessary energy", "so much energy he doesn't know what to do, so much energy he can't use it all up". Differentiation in this category is significant because of the abundant physical energy ascribed to boys, and because aggression seems closely associated with physical force. Parents of girls seem more likely to equate aggression with the personal reaction of anxiety and confusion, rather than with a release of uncontrollable gross motor energy. (p. 302)

Similarly, on issues of competition and dominance, there is cross-cultural evidence demonstrating that in 5 out of 6 societies studied, boys showed more "egoistic dominance" behavior than their female counterparts (Whiting & Pope, 1974). With regard to adult relationships, the findings indicate that boys are more likely to exhibit "negative behavior" than females. Noting that a higher number of "incidents" occurred with boys, Minton et. al. (1971) found that girls most often complied immediately with the mother's first directive to stop or change the behvior, while it was often necessary with boys to repeat the direction or to increase pressure.

The empirical data reported here are usually interpreted as evidence of the inequitable patterns of socialization experienced by boys and girls. Parents, teachers and social institutions have been accused of providing differential rewards and punishment, roles and opportunities that have led to sex-typed behaviors in males and females. Underlying this notion is the assumption that the liberalizing of child-rearing and educational practices will inevitably lead to a decrease in sex-typed behavior and consequently, to fewer sex-related problems.

The structural developmental position enunciated here proposes instead that many of the typically "male" behavior patterns outlined here and discussed in the literature are inevitable: they result from the young boy's attempt to acquire and exhibit those aspects of masculinity most salient to him in defining his sexual gender.

It was suggested at the outset that the developmental discontinuity in male sex-role functioning might also lead to an emotional vulnerability or insecurity on the part of the male child. Let us examine this possiblity. As noted earlier, the young boy's sexual gender is potentially ambiguous since it is tied to physical and anatomical attributes which he obviously lacks. Limited by the cognitive structures of preoperational thought, it is possible that a particular segment of young boys find the customary range of masculine outlets too restrictive or too vague to guarantee the estab-

lishment of an unambiguous sexual identity. For these boys, an excessive amount of competition, aggression, anger - those behaviors often labelled "acting out" and inevitably interfering with school related learning - may represent a necessary, albeit exaggerated response to the developmental task of gender acquisition. One might speculate that the predominance of male children as candidates for behavioral and emotional problems, acting out behaviors and learning disorders of various kinds may be at least partially explained by this formulation. Although there is no direct evidence for this hypothesis, it is certainly a question worth posing.

Summary and Conclusions

Developmental studies of sex-role concepts reveal that young children between 4 and 7 years of age equate masculinity with tangible physical signs of size, strength, depth of voice, body and facial hair, and physical prowess. It was hypothesized that young boys spontaneously gravitate toward those activities, roles and games which maximize the correspondence between existing traits and those they must ultimately attain. Themes of aggression, dominance and competition as well as the very narrow range of acceptable "male" behaviors are engaged in by young boys to ensure a stable gender identity. At one extreme, an excess of "masculinized" behavior such as aggression, anger or rivalry may be exhibited in the service of resolving an overly ambiguous male identity. Instances of

exaggerated male behaviors such as these may provide a clue to certain behavior problems which present themselves in disproportionate numbers among males in clinical settings.

The tendency for males to "act out" their masculine identity in this way must be viewed in contrast to the behavior of the young girl. Her play has typically been described as sedentary, peaceful and maternal, dominated by household themes and objects (Bettleheim, 1975; Paley, 1975). Clear about her "female" physical attributes of smallness, relative powerlessness, fair-skin and highpitched voice as well as her childbearing capacity, she too confirms her female identity in ways which correspond to the physical aspects of her gender. Her play and fantasy life stress nurturance, interpersonal sensitivity and gentleness (Erikson , 1950).

As noted earlier, Karen Horney discussed the notion of womb envy, raising the problematic issue for men of being required to perform or act in order to establish an identity, while women, through their childbearing capacity, can afford merely "to be". (p. 145) The hypothesis outlined in this paper differs slightly from that of Horney. It suggests instead that the strain inherent in the male role stems not from his inability to create a baby like the woman, but rather from the young boy's recognition of the discrepency between his present anatomical attributes and those he seeks to acquire. It is the difficulty he faces in affirming his own "masculine" identity, rather than his envy of the female, which inevitably predisposes him toward aggressive and competitive behavior. Thus, Horney's inital

observation that males have a greater need to act or to perform may be a result of the early developmental task which requires of young boys a clear expression of their masculinity; a striving for power, physical prowess and dominance.

It was pointed out above that most studies in the area of sex-roles have tended to stress the social inequities inherent in the differential expectations for males and females. Researchers have encouraged parents, teachers and clinicians to expand their conceptions of masculinity and femininity to permit wider opportunities for sexual and personal development. Programs of sex-role intervention often recommend that parents or teachers encourage cross-sex play, such as dress-up, doll play, nurturing and other domestic themes for boys, and correspondingly, that they promote sports and competitive activity in young girls. Based on the structural developmental model presented here, a word of caution should be sounded. If the principles outlined here are accurate, they suggest that there may perhaps be an important psychological reason for the narrower, more restrictive range of sex-typed behaviors exhibited by young boys, as well as for the persistent themes of competition, aggression and dominance which they exhibit. If gender identity is defined through the possession of specific physical attributes which they do not yet possess, and if a stable gender identity depends on clear evidence of such attributes, we may perhaps be interfering with a necessary tendency on the part of young boys to seek out those friends, toys, games or activities which validate

or confirm their emerging gender identity.

We must not confuse the need of all children to make a clear concrete judgment about their sexual gender with the issue of sexual equality. From the perspective adopted here, the 4 to 7 year old child is less concerned with moral issues of equality or androgyny that he is in organizing tangible cues and traits which define his identity relative to members of the opposite sex. In fact, evidence from a clinical sample of effeminate boys revealed that 84% were reported as having already started cross-dressing by their fifth year (Bates & Bentler, 1973), a finding which furtnur illustrates the young child's tendency to confuse perceptual cues such as dress, toys and physical attributes with gender. The perspective adopted here would suggest that parents dealing with young boys and professionals working with young children might delineate a broader set of categories from which young boys could compare themselves favorably to adult men. Instead of promoting less differentiation betweeen boys and girls, as is presently the trend, one might perhaps expand the categories from which an appropriate male identity can be fashioned. By clarifying such dimensions as occupational roles and by making visible the signficant aspects of "fathering", we will hopefully expand the range of appropriate "masculine" behaviors, while simoltaneously respect the child's need to define his gender.

One furthur word of explanation is in order. The model described here does not seek to justify or encourage the cont-

inuation of sex-typed behaviors and attitudes observed in young children. Rather, what is implied by this approach is the awareness that we cannot rely simply on educational or social efforts to change sex-role stereotypes, as if there were a 1:1 correspondence between what we tell children and what they believe. If we seek to transform social roles in the direction of greater sexual equality, or increased androgyny, we must recognize that conceptions of masculinity and femininity are embedded in material more complex than adult directives and exhortations. To intercede more effectively, it is necessary to clarify for children those distinguishing aspects of sexual gender which are accurate, namely the anatomical, and to emphasize their permanence, despite apparent changes in clothing, physical appearance, social roles and the like. Once accomplished, it is likely that with the proper adult guidance and societal support, the young child may proceed beyond that understanding to a fuller appreciation of the meaning and value of sexual equality.

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